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ABSTRACT

Questions about gifted readers and how best to teach them have been posed for years and continue to be posed by educators today. A review of current research helps to clarify how to identify gifted readers and what they need in the way of classroom instruction. The general consensus is that reading programs for the gifted should be specialized and should focus on critical and creative reading. Some programs which are currently popular in schools are the triad enrichment model, inquiry reading, and the Junior Great Books Program. Whole language classrooms (with their elimination of ability grouping) pose a special challenge for the teacher in educating the gifted reader. (TB)

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# Gifted Readers and Reading Instruction

*by Norma Decker Collins and Nola Kortner Aiex*

Questions about gifted readers and how best to teach them have been posed since the inception of gifted education. Do gifted readers require distinctive educational programs?

In the opinion of Margaret McIntosh (1982), an educator who reviewed the history of gifted education in the United States, the gifted reader, often overlooked in traditional reading programs, is in need of a specific kind of reading instruction. McIntosh reports that able readers have interests in reading that distinguish them from other readers—their preferences include science, history, biography, travel, poetry, and informational texts like atlases and encyclopedias. Current research reported in *USA Today* (30 March 1995) indicates that gifted elementary school children who participate in special programs do better academically than their gifted peers not in any program. This is one of the reasons that gifted readers should have a differentiated reading program. This Digest will discuss some of the aspects of differentiated reading instruction for the gifted.

## Salient Points

In reviewing the professional literature on reading instruction for gifted readers, several salient points about gifted readers emerge. They are that (1) gifted readers usually master basic reading skills by the time they come to school and are ready for complex concepts at an early age; (2) gifted readers tend to have an internal locus of control—they believe that achievement is the result of their own ability and behavior; (3) gifted readers need instruction in reading that is different from a regular classroom program; (4) instruction for very able readers should focus on developing higher cognitive level comprehension skills; (5) teaching reading to gifted readers requires more than a skills-oriented approach; (6) books for gifted readers should be selected on the basis of quality language—books that use varied and complex language structures are a primary source of cognitive growth; (7) reading programs for gifted readers should foster a desire to read; and (8) a reading program for gifted readers should include a variety of reading materials and strategies which are based on the present needs and demands of the reader, not on the chronological age or grade level. Jackson (1988) concluded that precocious reading ability is a complex skill, and that levels of specific subskills vary widely among individuals. She urges parents to encourage their gifted readers to pursue natural and enjoyable reading activities. When the gifted reader enters school, instruction must go beyond the traditional basal program, and the focus of reading programs for gifted readers should be on critical and creative thinking.

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## Critical and Creative Reading

Critical reading goes beyond the level of comprehension—it requires the reader to evaluate material and ascertain its worthiness, reasonableness, and usefulness. Through critical engagement with text, gifted readers are encouraged to view reading as a thinking process, as well as a language process.

Creative reading is the epitome of higher level reading. Going beyond critical reading, creative reading invites an imaginative interaction with print. New ideas are originated, examined, and applied. Teachers of gifted readers can help readers interact with texts in ways which will promote critical and creative reading. Encouraging wide reading confirms for the gifted reader that reading is for learning and enjoyment.

## Reading Programs

According to Levande (1993), "reading programs for the gifted should take into account the individual characteristics of the children, capitalize on the gifts they possess, and expand and challenge their abilities." Shaughnessy (1994) also recommends expanded literacy activities, such as guest speakers in the classroom, creative writing, and tie-ins of books with television or movies.

Most schools and teachers have the leeway to choose the instructional method and materials or gifted reading program that best fit their students' needs. There are several diverse specially designed programs that are popular with many school districts. Dooley (1993) cautions that "a stimulating reading program for gifted readers has at least two major components: provisions for mastering the basic curriculum quickly through curriculum compacting, and a differentiated curriculum created through modifications of the content and the processes used to explore that content." We will return to Dooley's points a little later in this Digest.

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Levande (1993) cites the triad enrichment model, inquiry reading, and the Junior Great Books Reading and Discussion Program as being used most frequently in American classrooms.

The triad enrichment model is based on giving gifted children the opportunity for self-directed reading and independent study. The enrichment triad incorporates three types of activities: (1) exploratory activities in which students examine areas of interest and then decide on a problem or topic to study in depth; (2) activities in which students are provided with the technical skills and thinking processes needed to investigate the research topic selected in the first step; and (3) activities in which students explore their topic through individual or small group work. The end result should be a product which documents the student's learning process (Levande, 1993).

Inquiry reading is a 4-week program which enables the gifted reader to research a topic in which he/she is actively interested. The program is geared for third grade and above. The student selects the topic, researches it, and presents his/her findings to the other students. Levande (1993) points out that this approach can be used in a classroom that uses basal readers, during the time that the basals are being used by most of the students.

The Junior Great Books Program offers a series of literature readings for grades 2 through 12 (Halsted, 1990). It is a well-known and venerable program, complex and highly structured, and challenging for the student.

Levande also advocates investigating the following recommended instructional models for gifted readers: AIME, reading-strategy lessons, DRTA (Directed Reading Teaching Activity), and vocabulary development through literature.

## Whole Language Classrooms

With the current emphasis on whole language instruction comes the elimination of ability grouping and thus, a special challenge for educating the gifted reader. Ganopole (1988) advocates a certain degree of flexibility in reading instruction in whole language classrooms, and emphasizes the use of authentic materials in meaningful contexts, a modified use of basals, acceptance of divergent student responses, etc.

Dooley (1993) mentions the extra effort needed to provide appropriate reading instruction for the gifted reader in whole language classrooms. She argues for curriculum compacting and a differentiated curriculum—points mentioned earlier in this Digest.

Curriculum compacting is a "systematic process through which proficiency in the basic curriculum is assured and time is made available for enrichment and acceleration" (Dooley, 1993). Students are first assessed on their mastery of the skills to be taught in the next reading unit—if they have already mastered those skills, they do not participate in the unit. To facilitate the learning of concepts and skills that have not yet been mastered, students might be asked to join the group when those particular skills are being taught, or the skills could be explained individually or in small groups of students. Another method might be the use of structured materials that deal with the concept (Dooley, 1993).

"When curriculum compacting is implemented, many highly able readers have time available for participating in a differentiated reading program. This program should not be more of the regular program. Instead it should focus on content and process modifications that reflect gifted students' instructional needs" (Dooley, 1993). Such modifications can give students the chance to read in depth on a theme or topic, even if it is not part of the regular curriculum.

Eppele (1989) and Shaughnessy (1993) offer two bibliographies which provide many sources of information on the gifted reader in the classroom.

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